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This paper presents evidence to support the claim that the teaching of writing at the university level requires a special approach unique to the field of English as a second language. The thinking process concept of writing instruction is advocated with two additions focusing on classroom activities for treating the language difficulties of foreign students in universities. First, a broad error analysis is suggested as an initial step in isolating problem areas. Secondly, sentence combining exercises are shown to be effective in treating many of these errors. Examples are given of sentence combining exercises used at Texas A&M University with reference to two types of syntactic and two types of rhetorical errors. (Author)

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Sentence-Combining, Error Analysis and the Teaching of Writing

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents evidence to support the claim that the teaching of writing at the university level requires a special approach unique to the ESL field. The thinking process concept of writing instruction is advocated with two additions focusing on classroom activities for treating the language difficulties of foreign students in universities. First, a broad error analysis is suggested as an initial step in isolating problem areas. Secondly, sentence-combining exercises are shown to be effective in treating many of these errors. Examples are given of sentence-combining exercises used at Texas A&M University with reference to two types of syntactic and two types of rhetorical errors.

Despite continuing reaction against the audio-lingual approach to language teaching, reading and writing skills have remained largely neglected in ESL training programs. But, while there are indications that linguistic and psycholinguistic insights into the reading process may yield information helpful in the teaching of that skill, the same cannot be said for writing. Most discussions of teaching writing continue to focus on the proper balance between controlled and free composition. While some stress the importance of detailed drill at the sentence level as a preliminary to writing, others emphasize writing as a thinking process and concentrate on the organization of ideas (Paulston).

Clearly, writing is both. Students need to organize their ideas properly and they need to express those ideas in sentences which exemplify standard, written English. But the methods used in teaching the students to perform this dual task depend to a great deal on the type of student involved. Those in intensive English programs have time for preliminary work. Non-native speakers enrolled in full-time study at the university level do not. Those in the latter category are faced with the task of fulfilling writing requirements in a wide range of courses. Moreover, those at the undergraduate level are usually required to take traditional Freshman English courses in composition and rhetoric or their equivalent and frequently, literature

courses as well. It is the teaching of writing for these students with which we shall be concerned in this paper.

It cannot be taken for granted that foreign students at American universities are proficient enough in English to cope with the writing requirements of the academic courses they take, especially if they have recently arrived in the country. The assumption is often made that such students may lack oral fluency in English due to the fact that they have not lived in an English speaking environment and because their prior training in English in the foreign country stressed reading and writing. In practice, the foreign training in both reading and writing, but particularly the latter, is rather superficial. The result is that these students enter American universities somewhat weak in their ability to write English.

University level students, therefore, often face a serious dilemma. The demands placed on them in English are quite advanced while their proficiency in writing English and the time available for improving this skill are quite limited. Teachers in such a situation face a problem of trying to combine controlled type writing with work emphasizing the prganization of ideas.

Given this situation, this paper endorses the thinking process concept of teaching writing but with two major additions designed to work on the language problems of university students.

First, error analysis has proved to be a useful technique in pointing out learning strategies and can be applied successfully to the teaching of writing. Secondly, practice with sentence-combining exercises has been shown to be helpful in developing writing skills for native and non-native speakers and can be incorporated directly into the overall program we are proposing.

The data included in this paper is taken from material used with 77 non-native speakers of English enrolled in Freshman English type classes at Texas A&M University during the current academic year (1974-75). Thirty-two of these students (41%) are native speakers of Spanish, thirty-two (41%) are Chinese, and the remaining 13 (18%) represent six other languages including Vietnamese, Arabic and Farsi.

ERROR ANALYSIS

In the past eight years we have seen error analysis come from an initial stage of cautious inquiry (Corder) to a well developed technique useful in determining the sequence of development in second language acquisition (Dulay and Burt). As error analysis has developed, however, it has not often been used with reference to the specific problem we have outlined in this papaer. This is so for a number of reasons. Most recent studies involving error analysis have treated child language acquisition. Even those which have been concerned

with adults have generally used oral language samples as input. (Bailey, Madden and Krashen). And finally, little time has been spent in relating errors to teaching. One recent description of how error analysis could be made part of the instructional process used the criterion of acceptability to help achieve more relevant and productive teaching (Burt). This is an extremely valid argument for dfining the direction which teaching should take and fits well into the pragmatic view of langauge instruction. But what is acceptable in spoken English in the context of adult education cannot be considered acceptable in written English in an academic setting.

How, then, can error analysis be applied to the context of university level writing? Admittedly, there are some difficulties. As has already been pointed out elsewhere (Oller: 197), it is frequently difficult to determine what a student meant by a certain construction in a composition and therefore the nature of the error is not clear. But this is more a problem in testing than teaching. Classroom contact with the student and the availability of a number of writing samples tend to lessen this problem. Also, an objection has been made to the use of error analysis on the basis that it cannot account for errors which are not made but avoided by the choice of an alternative construction with which the student is more familiar (Schachter). But, here again, the problem only arises if we restrict the type of errors we are looking for. If the student

avoids a certain construction such as a relative clause (presumably because he is not sure of how to form it) and substitutes another acceptable construction no problem in communication arises. But if, through avoiding the relative, he produces another construction which contains an error of a different type it is nonetheless an error.

It is with this idea in mind that in our preliminary analysis of errors gathered from the 77 students at Texas A&M we have begun by establishing broad criteria for "error" viz., " any form or construction which deviates in any way from that considered to be acceptable for standard, written, academic English." Such broad criteria can of course yield examples ranging from spelling mistakes to matters of style. While even these cases at the extreme ends of the scale can be made part of the teaching program, they tend to be more individual in nature and can best be treated as such through a writing laboratory if available. In this paper we shall be concerned only with certain types of syntactic and rhetorical errors. Specifically, we shall treat those errors which are examples of the types which can be handled in a classroom setting and which we feel can be made the object of sentence-combining exercises.

SENTENCE-COMBINING

Sentence-combining is not a new concept in language teaching. In an extensive study involving native English speakers at the elementary level (seventh grade) sentence-combining was shown to be an important factor in significantly improving writing skills (Mellon). In a similar study with non-native speakers sentence-combining was also used to improve writing proficiency.(Crymes). But in both cases the sentence-combining exercises were treated as an adjunct to the normal classroom work in writing. In fact, the point of both studies was to show that independent study of grammar could result in a growth in syntactic fluency as indicated in writing.

What we are proposing here is a greater emphasis on sentence-combining exercises as an integral part of instruction in writing, especially in relation to actual errors produced by university level students. Basically we are referring, then, to teacher produced materials to be used throughout the courses of instruction in writing and not textbook type material meant for a wide variety of situations dealing with the teaching of English. While some ESL writing texts do include sentence-combining exercises, they generally treat them as preliminary work and base them on a random choice of language difficulties.

EXAMPLES

The following are examples of the two major classes of errors we have isolated in our data, syntactic and rhetorical, and a sample of the sentence-combining type exercises we have used with them.

I. Syntactic

A. Word order

1. " .... drying with a handkerchief the raindrops from my face."

2. "I walked with my heavy suitcase around the airport."

In both cases the sentences can be broken down into their two components and the students asked to combine them once again to form the one correct sentence.

1.... drying the raindrops from my face.
... drying with a handkerchief.

COMBINE

... drying the raindrops from my face with a hankerchief.

2. I walked around the airport.

I walked with my suitcase.

COMBINE

I walked around the airport with my suitcase.

In both cases the principal clause is the first of the two sentences given. By consistently doing so the student can better see the relationship of verb to direct object which is the key to the word order difficulty here.

B. Sequence of tenses

1. "Before I eat dinner, I took a bath."
2. "When I traveled to the U.S. the trip seems long."

Again the sentences can be broken down as follows:

1. I ate dinner.

I took a bath.

COMBINE

Before I ate dinner, I took a bath.

2. I traveled to the U.S.

The trip seemed long.

COMBINE

When I traveled to the U.S. the trip seemed long.

In this latter example the student must supply the temporal conjunction and more than one word and more than one arrangement of clauses is possible. But, as we have seen in using these examples, no confusion results since the students tend to use the sentence closest to the one containing their original error.

C. Repetition of connectives

1. "Although I am not at home, but my eating habits haven't changed."

2. "While he was speaking the crowd left at the same time."

Here the error stems from including a redundant connective word. This is not difficult to imagine since the strategy the student is using is that of using words he has learned to convey concession or simultaneity but concentrating on communicating that idea to the extent that he uses two words or phrases where only one is necessary.

1. I am not at home.
   My eating habits heven't changed.

   COMBINE

   Although I am not at home, my eating habits haven't changed.

   OR

   I am not at home but my eating habits haven't changed.

2. He was speaking.

The crowd left.

COMBINE

While he was speaking the crowd left.

OR

The crowd left at the same time (while) he was speaking.

II. Rhetorical

A. Unnecessary repetition[1]

1. "The U.S.purchased the Louisiana territory from France when it paid $15,000,000 in the Louisiana Purchase in 1803."

2. "Texas joined the U.S. as a result when its citizens voted to join the U.S."

Here the first step is to isolate the key items which need to be included in the final sentence. And since we are dealing with an error beyond the syntactic level there is even more variety in the form of the combined sentence.

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[1]These examples of errors are taken from a writing exercise assigned in Lawrence, Mary S. Writing as a Thinking Process. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1972. p. 77.

1. The U.S. purchased the Louisiana territory from France.

   The U.S. paid France $15,000,000.

   The U.S. bought the Louisiana territory in 1803.

   COMBINE

   The U.S. paid France $15,000,000 for the Louisiana territory in 1803.

   OR

   The U.S. purchased the Louisiana territory from France for $15,000,000 in 1803.

2. Texas joined the U.S.

   The citizens of Texas voted to join the U.S.

   COMBINE

   Texas joined the U.S. when its citizens voted to do so.

   OR

   Texas joined the U.S. by a vote of its citizens.

An important aspect of these exercises is that the students must learn to eliminate any rpetitious words or phrases but this becomes fairly obvious when the sentences are broken down into their component parts and are themselves made into sentences. Mellon's study employed repetitions of this type with no difficulty and we have found no serious problems in using them with our students. In fact we find this to be support for the value of the sentence-combining technique because what apparently is not obvious to the student when he makes the error becomes apparent when he sees the sentence broken down.

B. Missing connectives

1. "We stayed in Los Angeles for 3 days. We rested from our trip. We visited Disneyland."

2. "It was early. I decided to read the newspaper. Then I went to bed."

Errors of this type are probably the easiest to put into sentence-combining form but they are the ones which require the most practice. The fact that a student writes a series of sentences of this type means that he is not aware of how they can be combined. Thus, it will require additional examples beyond the samples provided by the students themselves in order to train them to produce the following alternatives:

1. We stayed in Los Angeles for three days where we rested from our trip and visited Disneyland.
2. It was early so I decided to read the newspaper before going to bed.

Finally, some sentence-combining exercises can be used to review a number of errors of various types. These require more preparation, more classroom time, more detailed analysis and usually produce a greater variety of combined sentences. But, rather than presenting a further problem, such variety can serve to point out how English can be used to convey matters of emphasis and point of view. An example is the following:

Foreigners often come to the U.S.
The main goal of many of the foreigners is advanced study.
They like the facilities in the U.S.
Afterwards they return home.

COMBINE

Many foreigners often come to the U.S. for advanced study and, although they like the facilities here, they return home afterwards.

OR

(13)

The main goal of many foreigners who come to the U.S. is advanced study and, although they like the facilities here, they return home afterwards.

OR

Although many foreigners who come to the U.S. for advanced study like the facilities here they return home afterwards.

In conclusion, we have tried to point out the factors which make the teaching of writing at the university level a special but important area of investigation. As Muriel Saville-Troike has recently emphasized, this is one language problem we have tended to neglect:

> "In teaching English to foreign students at the university level, we have been recognizing that our instruction falls short of their need. We have been leaving them inadequately equipped with the skills they need for coping with university-level instruction in English. The need is for earlier and stronger emphasis on reading processes, and for teaching the more formal style required by textbooks and lectures rather than the conversational style of the Audio-Lingual materials."[2]

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[2]Muriel Saville-Troike, "TESOL Today: The Need for New Directions," TESOL Newsletter, VIII, 5&6, p.1.

Secondly, we have shown that error analysis can be an extremely useful technique in the teaching of writing, provided it is used from a broad perspective. And lastly, we have seen how one type of classroom exercise, sentence-combining, can be used to correct some of these errors. None of these suggestions provides a complete answer to the direction university level ESL teaching should take but hopefully, practices such as these will show us the way to make our task more relevant, challenging and successful.

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